

Churn Benefice Review: May 2021 Update

A huge thank you to everyone who has contributed to the Churn Benefice Review so far. The Review Group has received over 40 excellent responses so far, and these have come from individuals and from PCCs. Contributions are still coming in, and it's been great to hear constructive ideas from such a wide variety of stakeholders. If you haven't yet submitted your thoughts, please do so- we would love to hear from you!

In due course, the review group will produce a longer report summarising the main issues raised in the contributions that we have received. We will also be making some suggestions about the next stage of the process. We hope to have this fuller report ready in June.

However, we thought it might be helpful at this stage to provide a shorter report indicating some of the common themes which have emerged so far. Out of all the ideas put forward we have at this stage selected just three themes, which were touched upon by lots of you and which we think could point the way towards some key elements in a future strategy. All of these would need further development and resourcing, and in June we will be asking for people to express an interest in helping with that process.

Lay Education and Training.

Quite a few responses talked about the possibility of lay people taking on new responsibilities within the Churn Benefice (pastoral care, leading groups/services etc) as a way of expanding what we can do and of supplementing what our ordained staff can manage. There was a recognition that in many cases this might involve some further training and preparation for such individuals. If we want to move forward with this idea, we might want to establish a small group which could research and promote training opportunities for lay members of the Benefice.

The Diocese of Oxford and many other Christian organisations already offer a wide range of course on topics as varied as "Exploring Christian Faith" through to "Advanced pastoral care" and "Leading Alternative Forms of Worship". This approach could also be linked to the Personal Discipleship Planning (PDP) scheme that the Diocese is also promoting and which the Benefice started to develop in the last two years.

Developing Activities to Attract Younger People.

Another of the themes emerging from the Benefice Review has been the challenge of attracting and engaging younger people and family groups in church life. Many thoughtful, interesting and successful ideas have been expressed. All those respondents were keen to involve those people that are under 50, as well as the even younger school/college age group. It was noted by quite a few people that much of our current involvement is from people in the 50+ age bracket, and we would like to extend our provision to do more to attract a wider range of the population.

Some ideas that people have shared include: offering Messy Church sessions; extending the provision of Benefice wide youth groups; having family services, which are for all ages, rather than focussed primarily on younger children; encouraging more participation in all-age choirs and singing; and Duke of Edinburgh award opportunities within the church and the wider community.

Finding New Ways for our Churches to engage with their Local Communities.

Many respondents have felt that it is important for our Churches to find new ways to connect with their local communities. Many people today have a lack of understanding about the Church. We want people to feel that the Church is part of, not outside, the village community. It is felt that we

should especially welcome those on the fringes of our congregations, for example those who attend at Christmas and Easter. The gap between our churches and their local communities seems to have grown wider and we need to find ways to bridge that gap and remain in dialogue with our fellow citizens so that we can relate to them and them to us. The more that the church appears to be a strange distant place then the less attractive it may be to others, and the lower the chances may become of others wanting to join us.

How can we forge better links with the community? Lots of suggestions have been made. Greater use could be made of the church buildings for secular purposes, for example concerts and talks, so that people feel comfortable in our church buildings. In some cases, this might require some adaptation of those church buildings, eg. Toilet/kitchen/Wi-Fi provision.

Our churches could also organise events outside the church buildings, such as quizzes, bowling, teas, harvest supper, fete etc. These events could raise money for charities (not necessarily church charities).

Some villagers also value the presence of their church buildings (and bells) and will support the upkeep, cleaning and maintenance of those buildings even though they may rarely attend services. We could do more to encourage that, and some parishes have done that by developing 'Friends of the Church' schemes.

It was felt that such groups could organise fun social events, which can be inclusive, and not "preachy". It was thought that subtle outreach will work better than heavy evangelism! Cooperation between parishes could develop ideas and resources for community events, with such ideas to be interpreted locally as appropriate.

Next Stage.

The Review Group hopes to have a fuller report ready before the end of June 2021, which will include some suggestions as to the next stage of the process.

There will be further discussion and consultation, with individuals and with the PCCs, and it is hoped that a clear way forward for us a Benefice will have emerged by the end of the Summer.

In the meantime, do feel free to continue to contribute your thoughts, and raise any questions you may have. We very much want to hear from as many people as possible, and every voice matters. Maybe the ideas set out above will provoke further thoughts and contributions and we would love to receive those during the next few weeks.

And please do remember this Benefice Review in your prayers. We think that it is very much about trying to listen to what God might be saying to us at this time, and as we look to the years ahead. Prayer will help us to focus on God and be open to the working of his Holy Spirit, as he seeks to deepen our relationship with Jesus and bring blessing to our churches and communities. We believe that He has a plan for our Benefice, and it is certain to be a very good one!

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